

The Importance of Youth Civic Engagement

Civic engagement plays a vital role in influencing how decisions are made. It allows citizens to influence policy, local values, and local government priorities. I believe that it is important for all age groups to contribute beneficially and participate in their communities. I especially believe that it is important for young people to be involved through civic engagement. I feel this way because civic engagement offers many benefits including but not limited to allowing young citizens to propel or create change locally and nationally, gain experience and education, and it educates them about their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

To begin, it is important for youth to be involved in civic engagement because it allows young people to propel and create change locally and nationally. Through participation, youth make a difference in the civic life of their communities. Their work helps to promote and advocate for a better quality of life for themselves and their fellow citizens through both political and non-political processes. This can include nonviolent direct actions such as political activism, environmentalism, community and national service, volunteering, protesting, marching, public demonstrations and speeches, voting, and service-learning projects. Youth are given the chance to take charge of their futures and influence policies that will benefit both them and their communities.

Secondly, civic engagement can provide young folk with valuable and educational experiences. Civic engagement can help young people to be better informed about current events and government decisions that affect their everyday lives. While at the Capitol building in Jefferson City, I learned that there is a much more complex process when it comes to making the best decisions. Residents of municipal districts must advocate for what they believe is best for them. They have to speak to their representatives and not shy away from difficult questions

because after all, they are there to advocate and represent you (which is why it is so important to vote). Speaking to and being able to listen to what representatives such as Kevin Windham and Kimberly-Ann Collins had to say about the topics of food agriculture, water pollution, funding, and bills informed me of important acts that were taking place. The more educated people are about the state of things, the more likely they are to vote, act, and be civically engaged.

Lastly, civic engagement educates young people about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. It allows them to develop skills that are valuable to them. It was unbelievable how many students at my school were unaware of the power and rights that they held. Many did not know about the local government, the effects of voting, or how vital having correct information was. They blamed the president for the horrible state of the roads (pot-holes) and the lack of positive change that was occurring within the Normandy and St. Louis area. However, they were blaming the wrong person. Local officials have power and sometimes use that power to make decisions that negatively affect people, but it is the residents of those districts that elect these officials who then make policies. That is why voting, which is another form of civic engagement, is so important. Civic engagement such as voting, protesting, marching, etc. is especially essential now due to the rigorous attack on our civil and human rights. Every person deserves equal access to education, uncontaminated water, healthy food, a safe place to live, and should have the right to make decisions for their own bodies as well as who gets to represent them. Civic engagement can teach and encourage young people to participate and use their voices in a responsible, empowering way.

I understand that it may be difficult for some to believe that they can create much change due to the long history of the targeting, systems of oppression, exploitation, and segregation of their communities that formed the lack of trust in government officials, healthcare workers, and

police officers. Civic engagement such as speaking to the representatives of their districts may help address or bring light to these subjects. While at the Capitol building in Jefferson City, I was able to interact with several elected officials who are supposed to represent and make decisions in the best interest of their districts. I also got the opportunity to sit in on hearings and gain valuable knowledge of processes that take place to pass bills and to come to the most unified conclusion. I am very grateful for the experience that I had. I understand that not everyone gets the opportunity to speak to their district representatives face to face. Hopefully, through civic engagement youth (and others) get the opportunity to voice their opinions, communicate, and contribute to their communities in engaging and educational ways to get back their say in what their futures look like.

To summarize, civic engagement is vital to the way communities function and produce change. Civic engagement allows young people to influence policy, local policies, and local government priorities (clean water, access to fair and equitable education, jobs, healthy food, etc). It is very important for youth to be involved in civic engagement because it offers many benefits such as creating a space for young citizens to propel or create change locally and nationally, to gain valuable experiences and information, and be educated about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Civic engagement can also give young people the opportunity to make mature and responsible decisions about their futures as well as encourage them to advocate for what they believe is best for themselves and their communities.